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ABSTRACT

This resource booklet focuses on the definitions, developmental stages, and the benefits of socio-dramatic play. The booklet deals with the players, shows how adults can support children's play, describes the play environment, and offers some suggestions for development of curriculum based on play. The booklet discusses children's approach to learning and play, as well as three play styles--explorers, spectators, and dramatists. It then examines the teacher's role in enhancing children's play and offers several suggestions on time allocation, group size, and environment. The booklet also discusses the role in children's play of four teaching styles--prestructuring, redirecting, non-intervening, and extending. The importance of appropriate physical environment and play materials is also examined. The booklet concludes with advice on implementing play programming. Contains 14 references. (TJQ)

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PRETEND PLAY:

A Natural Path to Learning

Barbara Creaser

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A Natural Path to Learning

Barbara Creaser

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Throughout 1990 I have had contact with a group of teachers who are using play as the basis of their programming. Two work in child care centres, two in preschools, one has a transition (kindergarten) class of five to six year olds and one has a family grouped class with five through to nine year olds in a transition (kindergarten) through to Grade 4 Class. We have gradually moved from a view of the teacher as controller and authority to one of the teacher as facilitator, resource provider, learner and co-player.

My thanks to colleagues Lyn and Marg and to the group Jenni, Judy, Jo, Robyn, Christine and Sharyn.

INTRODUCTION

The Resource Booklet "Rediscovering Pretend Play" (September, 1990) focused on the definitions, developmental stages and the benefits of socio-dramatic play. This booklet deals with the players; how adults can support children's play; the environment; and some suggestions for programming with play as the basis for the curriculum.

THE CHILDREN'S APPROACH TO LEARNING AND PLAY

In 1983 at a world conference of OMEP (the world organisation for early childhood education) the encapsulated theme of a keynote address was:

> To some extent each child is like all other children.
>
> To some extent each child is like some other children.
>
> To some extent each child is like no other child.
>
> Caldwell, 1983

In other words there are universalities which apply to all children, commonalities that allow some children to be grouped and classified but each child has unique qualities. These statements certainly apply when looking at children as players.

Wolf and Grollman (1982) talk of two broad styles in which children approach living and learning. They describe the groups as patterners and dramatists. Patterners are children who see patterns in their world, who notice designs and systems and are aware of shape, size, colour, order and quantity. Dramatists are children who seem alive to the social dimension of experiences and work through learning by the means of socio-dramatic play.

Greenspan (1985) added a third style, the spectator. He suggested that children could be categorized into three styles: the explorer (patterner), the dramatist and the spectator. He encouraged parents to understand (the same could be said to teachers) that even though a child might be approaching learning predominantly in one style, that child should be given opportunities to play in all three styles. It also needs to be said that no child would be pure explorer or pure dramatist but would bring different styles or strategies into effect for different situations.

The Three Play Styles

Explorers

Explorers are children who see their environment as a laboratory in which they can experiment. They manipulate resources and investigate how things work and why things happen. They have a tendency toward order and sequence. They seek the right way and prefer activities which indicate a clear completion. If the last piece of puzzle fits in, the task is successfully finalized.

These children "explore and build on the properties of the objects around them" (Grollman 1984:9). They frequently involve themselves in construction play and may be part of the building of the scene for dramatic play, yet do not take part in the pretend roles. They may also be described as builders, manipulators, investigators, questioners and convergent thinkers.

Spectators

Spectators are often on the side-lines of play. They are the children who watch, listen and sometimes add their comment. Previously these children caused adults concern, because they were not 'doers'. They need to be acknowledged as having a different play mode which need not be a handicap if adults and other children allow them to fully utilize their own special style (Lakin, 1987).

> Audrey, a four year old, being observed, indulged in a great amount of solitary play in which she talked to herself. Her disposition made her more introspective and reflective than outwardly expressive. Much of the content of her play was removed from daily experience and probably came from books. Her way of maintaining her pretend seemed to be to keep herself in solitary situations.

> Jens, four years old, exhibited some socio-dramatic play behaviour. He seemed to have the predisposition to be a dramatist. He seemed to have the imaginative ideas, but his attempts to interact with adults and children did not work for him. His ideas were not taken up and he appeared to feel rejected.

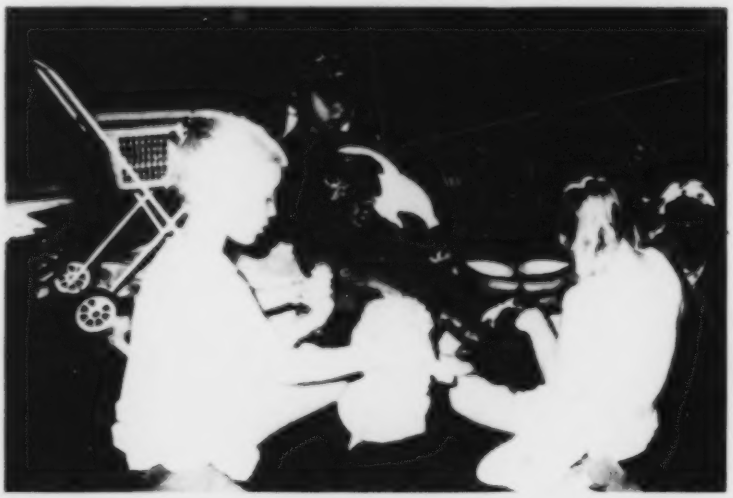
These children may be examples of spectators. Weininger (1986) separated pretending and imagining - a device which is helpful when looking at spectators because it could be that the imaginative activity is present but the expressive pretend mode obscure.

> *Imagining - "what if" - is a solitary activity within the child's mind, only sometimes overheard in actual words. Pretending - "as if" - is usually done with other children, or for the child who has no-one with whom to play, with imaginary people or dolls.*
>
> (Weininger, 1986:28)

Spectators might also be labelled as writers, readers, conversationalists, assessors and reflective thinkers. They are contemplative, questioning and thinking rather than participating in the expressive socio-dramatic play.

Dramatists

Fein (1987) used the term 'master player' but the term 'master dramatist' is a better description for children who play predominantly in the pretend mode. The 'master dramatists' pretend and take on roles with remarkable ease. They can take virtually any object and turn it into something else to suit the roles that they have taken on. They can give personalities and roles to objects in order to transform them into companions, they can take on roles and become the mummy, the Ninja Turtle, the doctor or the dancer. These dramatists at the most complex level can imagine the necessary scene and props and play out complicated episodes with no materials available. The ability to transform increases with age.



'Master dramatists' pretend and take on roles with remarkable ease.

Children for whom socio-dramatic play is the predominant or preferred mode and who approach their learning via this style might be observed displaying the following characteristics:

1. The children spend a high percentage of free play time in pretend play.
2. The children have the ability to sustain pretend play episodes for ten minutes or more.
3. The children have the ability to work in groups of two or more children.

4. The children use words to denote 'as if' or 'pretend' behaviours. These words seem to cue children into the fact that the episode is in progress or about to begin.

> *"You could pretend its real"* says Bevan to Cameron who is standing in the crocodile cage having said of the crocodile, *"but its only a puzzle"*.

5. The children have rich experiences and knowledge which allows them to play out a variety of themes.
6. The children use humour in the play and show that they derive pleasure from it.
7. The children show flexibility in negotiating and sharing ideas in order to 'keep the play going'.
8. The children have the ability to transform objects, persons and ideas.

In socio-dramatic play these children expose what they know about a range of topics. With freedom to be expressive in this way children exchange and build knowledge, skills and attitudes.

> *In their play children project themselves into adult activities of their culture and rehearse their future roles and values. This play is in advance of development .... In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour, in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself.*
>
> (Vygotsky, 1978:129)

Vygotsky suggests that play and especially socio-dramatic play leads development.

THE ADULTS' ROLE

The teacher's role is often more hampering than enhancing of the play. It is important that adults working with young children realize that children's socio-dramatic play is most complex and valuable when children direct it themselves and have control (Tizard and Hughes, 1984; Sylva, 1980; Daniels, 1987).

Provide an environment where materials and props are easily accessible to children and can be manipulated by them.

Adults who wish to support the socio-dramatic play approach to learning need to develop intervention tactics that give children power to be self-directed.

They need to:

1. Make time allocations that give children opportunities for long periods of uninterrupted self directed socio-dramatic play. This will impact on the centre or school schedules.

2. Connect children and provide for groups, large and small, pairs and solitary time as part of socio-dramatic play. This will allow for a variety of interactions.

3. Provide a challenging physical environment where materials and props are easily accessible to children and can be manipulated by them. This gives children opportunities to create the scenes for the play, to construct the props and have a range of choices related to the preparation of the scenes.

4. Create an atmosphere conducive to self-respect, confidence, competence, and acknowledgement of effort, in which limits are clear and children can feel secure.

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Highly complex socio-dramatic play is relatively rare in early childhood settings and it would appear that the constraints effectively eliminate the opportunities. The adults most often apply the constraints.

One constraint is TIME. If highly complex socio-dramatic play is to develop, long periods of uninterrupted time are needed, as the play frequently includes a segment of planning and pre-play preparation before children can take on roles and begin interaction. In early childhood settings, besides having a schedule which may curb slow-developing play, there is a risk that adults will intervene in a literal way, and when adults do this with play which is divorced and suspended from reality, it should be expected that the play will deteriorate if not disintegrate (Fein, 1987).

> Billy is "revving" around the playroom on an imaginary motorcycle demonstrating to an observer how his new Uncle Joe can ride.
>
> Adult to Billy: *"We don't run inside. If you want to do that go outside and run."*
>
> The adult was not fully aware of what Billy was doing. The acting out of new Uncle Joe and his impressive bike was important to Billy, but Billy stopped running and walked out to the verandah with a bemused expression. He found himself outdoors with nothing to do.

Another constraint imposed by adults but often excused by the size of the setting is the number of children who may constitute a group. If the size of the groups is limited the complexity of the play may also be limited. If children are only ever exposed to one or two other children in a group then they will find it difficult to cope when confronted with a group of 15 children trying to negotiate the playing out of a particular episode. Rules like "only 4 children allowed in the block corner" put a limit on the possibilities for complex socio-dramatic play.

The third constraint is the environment which is most often arranged by adults to function in ways that adults find comfortable: organisation, tidiness and appearance are usually based on adult criteria. Environments created by children for play are often different. Children will use furniture and materials in imaginative ways. Scenes for play are often not particularly aesthetically pleasing to adults.

Finally, the hesitancy of teachers to trust children limits the opportunities for high level play. When children are supported in their socio-dramatic play the quality of the play improves. In turn teachers appreciate the improvements and support the play more fully. There seems to develop an upward spiral by which the work of both adults and children grows in quality. Adults gradually move more and more into the role of resource person to the children and the children demand resources in order to learn.

> *Children realise this right to play when the adults around them appreciate and respect their playfulness and provide ample time and space for them to play.*
>
> (Almy, 1984)

Adult Teaching Styles

The degree and type of intervention by the teacher will depend on the experience and competence of the children as players and on the teacher's goals. The intervention will also depend on the play styles of the children and the teaching styles of the adults.

Roberts and Tamburrini (1980) described four different teaching styles which have been paralleled in some of the work of Jones (1987). The styles are affected by the stage of development of the teachers as well as their predispositions. Some of the styles have negative aspects, but nevertheless there would be times when any of these styles could be appropriate.

Prestructuring Style

"This is a style in which either by direction and/or by providing highly structured materials which virtually dictate to the child what he/she can do, children's play is to a great extent prescribed by the adult" (Tamburrini, 1980:139). The teacher who uses this style is also directed by inflexible materials and teaching instructions. A prestructuring style may at times be appropriate, but when intervening in socio-dramatic play it should not dominate. Pulaski (1970) showed that children played more imaginatively and ranged over many themes when materials were unstructured.

Redirecting Style

Teachers often provide a rich environment with a range of materials, and "are highly active in the context of the children's play" (Tamburrini, 1980:140). The redirecting teacher's intervention is based on pre-conceptions rather than observation and assessment of what a child is paying attention to in the play. The style includes channelling of play activities by the teacher into other kinds of activities, the outcomes of which are part of the adult agenda but not the current focus of the play.

There are times when the outcome for the individual child or the group is to do with adult goals and on these occasions this style would be appropriate.

The Non-Intervening Style

The teacher makes rich provisions of materials for children's play but then adopts a bland and passive role intervening only when needed to provide more resources, to assist in resolutions of social conflicts, or offer comfort.

Tizard (1977) reports that when adults are passive the play is of short duration and poorly elaborated. This style might be adopted in order to observe children and get to know when particular behaviours are occurring and what catalysts trigger situations.

The Extending Style

For children who operate in the socio-dramatic mode the extending style is best. The teacher using this style provides a rich diversity of materials and spontaneous play is encouraged.

The teacher adopting this style also participates with the children in their play in ways that are concerned with their intellectual development, she does so, however, only after first ascertaining the nature of the children's themes in their play and her strategies are concerned with helping them elaborate those themes.

(Tamburrini, 1980:140)

For children who operate in the socio-dramatic mode the extending style of teaching is best.

Adults supporting socio-dramatic play need to take great care in making decisions about how and when to intervene. There are several principles that might be applied.

1. Children who are just beginning to use dramatic play need props which have some realism, such as, home corner furniture, toy cars, picnic sets, toy irons and dolls. Children around two years of age have considerable knowledge about families and the home environment. As age increases their everyday experiences increase and thus gradually they are able to act out more varied situations such as shopping, holidays, camping, doctors and hospitals. The following examples illustrate adults support of the play of children under three years of age.

Chris, a student of child care, presented 'Washing Day' to a group of children aged between two and three years. She provided two buckets of warm soapy water, a small bucket of pegs, a pile of clothes to be washed and a string line tied between a tree and the fence. She demonstrated washing and sang, "This is the way we wash our clothes so early in the morning". The children needed very little encouragement. They plunged into the suds.

Trevor (2.7) holding a handful of bubbles close to Lenard's face: *"Look Bubbles"*.

Erica (2.5) to herself *"Clean now"*, and she pulled a dress from the bucket and went to hang it on the line.

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Flora presented a tea party for four children, Zelma (2.5), Mitchell (2.0), Claire (18 months) and Sarah (12 months).

Zelma busied herself at the table making cups of coffee with the tea set. She picked up a cup about to drink from it.

Zelma: *"Oh, it's hot"*, she said and then blew into the cup to cool it.

These examples also illustrate the way children can convey to adults the knowledge they have.

2. Children between ages four and six years are capable of pretending with props without realism. Almost anything can be used 'as if' it were something else. Blocks can be used to construct scenes, zoos, stations, boats, castles. Horses can be created from a long cardboard cylinder with a sock pulled over one end for a horse's head. At this stage the adult needs to supply an endless quantity and variety of junk, equipment and materials that can be used in a multitude of ways. All the provisions for play need to be able to be manipulated by the children. Adults need to hand over the creating of the setting to the children. Those fixed features of many early childhood settings are likely to get a shake up. The 'home corner' space may disappear while camps and zoos take over. The whole arrangement of the room may change while a train, a station and a castle are needed.

3. Older children with more detailed knowledge and refined motor skills move towards creating more realistic props. They will make props and dress-ups more accurate in detail and at this stage will need adults who can supply not only varied materials but also reference materials so that they can check details. The children in the six to eight or nine year age range are moving into the next stage of play (that is games with rules and performance) so often their socio-dramatic play develops a consistent script and may need performing.

Children in the classroom created a play, *A Trip Around Australia*. It involved a seven year old and two eight year olds, all girls, and lasted 15 minutes while an enraptured class of 5-9 year olds watched, listened and later commented. The innocuous title in no way hinted at the gruesome content that followed - the search for lost parents, of murders and eloctrocutions and family fights and finally happy homecomings for the "three sisters". The teacher was intrigued by the content and what might have triggered it, and the fact that the class always indicated great appreciation of such performances. The topics are of much interest and meaning to these children, both performers and audience. The adult in that class allows time for rehearsal and performance, supports the presentation of performers, encourages criticism by the audience and provides space and props.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Not only the adults' teaching style but also the adults' creation of the learning environment affects how children can play and behave. Environments suggest particular behaviours - carpet, cushions and soft sofas encourage lounging, relaxing and quiet activities. Open spaces and hard level surfaces suggest physical movement and organised games. The adults in early childhood settings have a big part to play in the design and use of spaces.

The environment for early childhood and socio-dramatic play in particular, needs to take account of children being in control and having as much opportunity as possible to act on or manipulate equipment and materials. This means both must be easily accessible to children and flexible in the way they can be used.

A major component of dramatic play is its preparation. Children spend large blocks of time in the co-operative construction of the scene. Some children's involvement is only in this phase and they may not participate in the role playing theme. Others, having achieved a satisfactory 'set' for their play will then take on roles and play within the set they have constructed.

Materials and equipment must be accessible to children and flexible in the way they can be used

There are adults who allow children to make the decisions about how the environment will be set up. These people have noted that children preferred to construct their own scenes rather than use centre provided furniture.

A group of four year olds complained to the teacher that they didn't want to play in the 'home corner' - they wanted to build their own house. They did, and the outcome was much more imaginative. A child care worker reported that she had made shop sets, restaurant sets and various others but no matter how exciting those sets appeared to the adult the children carted their home making gear to an unstructured area and set up and played mummies and daddies over and over again.

It takes courage for the adult to give up the task of setting up the environment and to allow the children to make those decisions.

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The adult's role as far as the environment is concerned is that of a provider of a wealth of rich materials. As the age of the dramatist increases the materials and equipment can be less realistic and more unstructured. Children in the earliest stages of pretending need props that resemble the real thing.

When the ideas for play come from the children the main need is for a constant and varied supply of materials.

Two girls, eighteen months of age, are bathing dolls in two small baby baths. They pull their baths close together and squat opposite each other discussing the washing process while rubbing the dolls with very soapy washers and covering the dolls from head to foot with white foam.

Four year old Brendan used a torch covered with red cellophane as the burning centre of his campfire. The same torch was used without the cellophane to see into the nocturnal animals' cage and later again it provided day and night so that a bird in a nest would know whether to go to sleep or not.

When the ideas for the play and the arrangement of the environment come from the children the main need is a constant and varied supply of construction material.

PROGRAMMING WITH PLAY AS THE BASIS

Programs for children under the age of eight (and maybe even older children) should provide for all types of players - explorers, spectators and dramatists. Most early childhood settings give many opportunities for explorers and spectators, but the programs lack time, spaces and resources for the dramatists to engage in socio-dramatic play.

Radical change is likely to cause confusion and chaos for the children so institute changes slowly, and maybe just one area at a time. Some activity areas will remain, for example the library, puzzles and construction sets, music space and instruments and science centres, but even they will move and be flexible depending on where the children decide to construct the sets for their play.

To begin, clear one space in the room and discuss with the children what they would like to 'play out' and what they would need in order to do so. Sometimes the interest is sparked by an excursion for a small group of children, sometimes by one child's experience (e.g. hospitalization), sometimes by a local event, sometimes by the resources and just very rarely by an interest of the adult.

For those who are interested to move from a 'regular' program to a program that incorporates socio-dramatic play, the following story of an evolving play program may be encouraging.

One program began with an excursion to a small local zoo. On the visit the children experienced a ride on a tour train around the zoo and saw many Australian native animals and birds. Back in the centre they discussed and then built the train, a railway crossing, a platform and a ticket office and two pens - a nocturnal house and a crocodile cage. To carry out the construction of the scene they were resourced by the adults with:

indoor blocks, paint, outdoor blocks, paper, paste, construction plank set, staples, scissors, animal and bird puppets, boxes, torches, four tables with varied collage materials.

The children established their own zoo and train play which lasted over many days. They built on the play to make it more and more complex.

The construction of the scene was a slow process. It catered for spectators and explorers in the preparation stage and dramatists in the role playing stage.

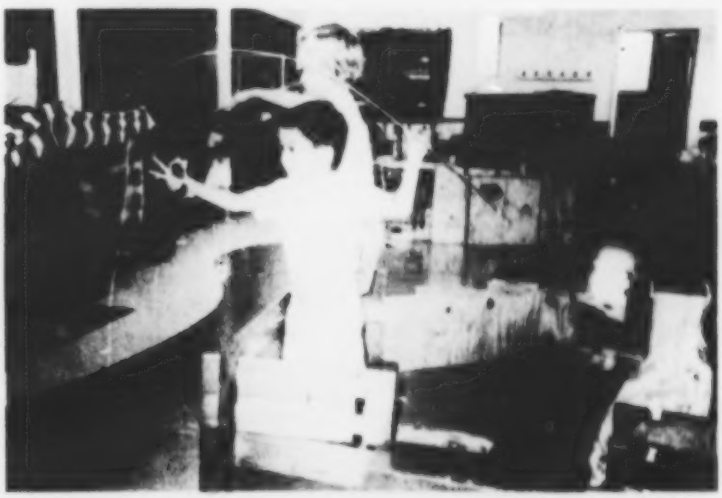
Around the scene area were several tables of attractive construction and collage materials that children could use to make their own birds and animals. Writing implements and materials were accessible and the need for writing was embedded in the 'theme'. Children needed tickets to ride on the train. They cost $1. There was the need for train signals and signs for the cages, e.g. Danger Crocodile.

Many children were interested and involved in this lively scene and it took up approximately one third of the indoor floor space.

A short time later children returned after a long weekend full of tales of camping. Camping was discussed. The train was dismantled, the zoo cages remained and alongside the zoo area grew a campsite. A tent and annexe were supported and suspended by various means in an indoor space next to the library. A campfire was built from rocks and stumps that the children transported by 4 wheel cart from outside. Staff and families provided eskies, sleeping bags, cooking utensils and everything an experienced camper would need. There

were billies, lamps, and rubber waders and the resultant play was rich and complex. Children illustrated through their dramatic play what a vast amount of knowledge they had about camping and the tropical outdoors.

On another occasion, the inspiration came from an adult bringing in two fishing lines made from a piece of flexible palm, a length of string and a paper clip 'hook'. That resource provided the inspiration for fishing play. From outdoor hollow blocks the children built two boats. At the work tables many children began preparing all types of fish - sharks, rainbow fish, seahorses, starfish, barramundi and more. One morning was spent in hectic preparation while some children began to pretend to fish. At the end of the morning the teacher and children discussed what might be added the next day. The children decided they wanted a shop where they could buy things necessary for the boats. The list, which was written by the teacher on an easel, included paint, food, noodles, drinks and more. They also decided that the construction which had earlier been the train ticket office could now become the shop, "but we might need more space", offered one child. The teacher agreed that the next day they may have to see whether one shop would do or whether a second would need to be built. Though the teacher wrote the list the children were invited to illustrate the items. A three year old visitor offered, "I can do biscuits" and when the group was dismissed she took a texta and put her 'biscuits' on the easel.



Two 'fishing lines' provided the inspiration for days of rich, complex play.

At any one time there can be two or three or more play interests running concurrently. It is rarely the case that the whole group of children will be interested in just one theme. This method of planning allows for multi-themes running side by side and the array of materials and construction pieces allows for children to be part of the themes in a variety of ways.

Play programming gives children control over the environment and they get to direct their own play. Play programming releases adults to observe, facilitate and resource the play. It

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also allows the adults time to see what children know and what new knowledge and skills they are acquiring from the play.

One girl of four years spent an hour drawing her own fish(black texta on white paper) colouring them in and then meticulously cutting them out. Another girl used one of the reference books in order to draw "a big family of penguins". She needed a word of encouragement to get started. She commented to the teacher that she needed help.

Jenny: *I can't draw penguins.*

Teacher: *What could you do first?*

Jenny: *The head.*

Teacher: *That sounds a good way to start.*

Jenny started confidently and finished sometime later very pleased with her big family of penguins.

The hardest thing for the adults in this type of program is to let go, to trust that the children can do things and do learn from the processes involved, and to keep on believing that complex socio-dramatic play is a valid learning style.

A play program might also be called an emergent curriculum and it is a curriculum, the content of which is far more exciting and imaginative than what might be covered in a core curriculum handed down by a distant bureaucracy (Jones, 1987). It is more stimulating for both children and adults.

CONCLUSION

Play programming provides for all three types of players. Such a program needs to allow large blocks of uninterrupted time. An hour is probably a minimum. Such a program needs to provide for children to add to the complexity of the set and the roles from day to day, even week to week. Time needs to be sufficiently extensive to allow for planning, constructing and practice that may have to occur **before** socio-dramatic play begins. This time must also allow for play in groups, as children need practice in acquiring the skills needed to co-operate, negotiate, direct and share ideas about the content of the play and the actions and the script that might accompany it.

For children to be able to role-play they need rich life experiences first hand supported by reference materials, books, posters, photographs and construction materials.

Socio-dramatic play needs to in the control of the children.
Children need adults who respect, value, resource and facilitate their play.

Programming with play as a "basis" is not an easy option. It requires special teachers but the satisfaction of a program that supports one's beliefs about how children learn is worth the effort.

THE PLAY'S THE THING

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